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*San Jose State University*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.f6cr-6zqa>

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ABOVE PARADISE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Lara Gularte

December 2006

UMI Number: 1441096

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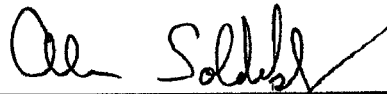
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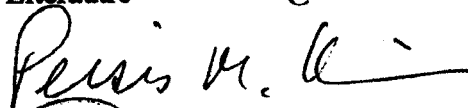
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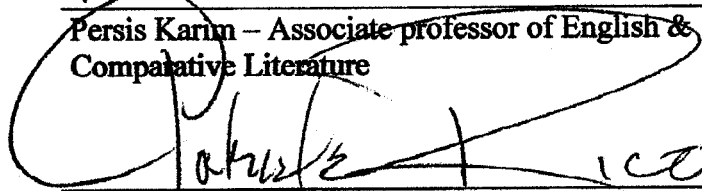
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## ABSTRACT

### ABOVE PARADISE

by Lara Gualarte

This thesis poetry collection contains stories about my Portuguese pioneer family who settled in the Scott Valley near Fort Jones California beginning in the mid 1800s to early 1900s. They came for gold but turned eventually to ranching becoming more personally connected to the land. A major theme in the collection concerns the importance of landscape as connection to historical and cultural legacy.

The collection is largely composed of narrative poems written in free verse about the experiences of Portuguese immigrants in this little known area of California. Many of the poems are clustered around the theme of the poet/speaker searching for her family history at her ancestral home place. The family members who could tell the speaker about her history are all dead and buried and she must look not only to her own memories, but to the land where her family once lived for answers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors of the following magazines, in whose pages some of these poems originally appeared: *The Santa Clara Review*, *Kaleidoscope*, *The Montserrat Review*, *Watershed*, *San Francisco City Guide*, *CONTINUITY*, *The Preservation Action Council of San Jose's newsletter*, *Caesura*, *Poetry Center San Jose*, *Poet's Corner Press*, *Best Poems, 2004*, *Letras da revista Saber/Acores*, *Manzanita*; *Literary Journal of the Mother Lode and Sierra*, *Orchard Valley Review*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Skyways Anthology*, *The Silverblack Journal of Poetry*, *The Manzanita Quarterly*, *San Jose's downtown magazine*, *Zambomba*.

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## Preface

My poetry collection titled "Above Paradise" contains stories about my Portuguese pioneer family who settled in the Scott Valley near Fort Jones California beginning in the mid 1800s to early 1900s. Gold was discovered in Siskiyou County around 1850, and large numbers of Portuguese emigrated to the Siskiyou mountain area of Northern California to hunt for gold. This area of California was called the "Portuguese mining capital" by 1880. My great grandmother came to Fort Jones as a mail order bride during this period and today her homestead remains a local landmark.

The importance of landscape connecting the legacy of history and culture is a major theme in the collection. Not long ago people lived intimately with the land, setting roots deep in place depending upon land and their knowledge of it for physical and psychological sustenance. We are drawn to a place because of the stories the landscape encloses, the memories it holds, or the beauty that calls us back again and again.

The poems in the collection are written in free verse and mainly in the narrative. Many of the poems describe the experiences of Portuguese Immigrants who settled in this part of California. In the search for her ancestors, the poet/speaker travels to her ancestral home place. When the speaker discovers that all her family is dead and buried, she looks to the land where they lived for answers. In the poem "At the Village of Santa Barbara, Island of Pico; Looking for My Great, Great Grandmother, Maria Francesca de Cabral" the speaker is literally scraping at lava stones to find her past: "My fingernails scrape lava stones, / loosen dust."

In the poem "Fifty Years Later" the speaker goes back to her great grandmother's homestead, where she spent time as a young girl only to find a now abandoned ranch in a dilapidated condition. Here the speaker loses faith in her search:

No one at the window waves.  
A hawk lies dead on the front porch,  
A wasp nest above the door.  
Kneeling, I crack twigs and pray hard  
to remember where I came from.  
Why I came.

Many of the immigrants who settled in the Scott Valley area turned eventually from gold prospecting to ranching becoming more personally connected to the land. The theme of life, death and rebirth dominates the collection. In the poem "The Immortals" the speaker goes so far as to liken the hi-way through the valley as a birth canal:

Sunlight over corpses  
hollowed by decay  
bones as body of the rock  
of the land,  
a history of how  
grasses move  
blade by blade.  
Hi-way 3  
through Scott valley

a birth canal  
for another way  
to be born  
to life and death.

The geography of place and the speaker's intimate connection with the land gives her a sense of connection to the former inhabitants promising that they will not be forgotten. To find her own identity, the speaker must discover that man and nature are inseparable. She explores how the natural landscape is linked to the essence of human existence both physically and spiritually.

The theme of faith and divinity in the natural world can be found throughout this poetry collection. My thesis poems borrow techniques from the lyrical voice and narrative works of Robinson Jeffers. His ability to write about the relationship between humanity and nature describing his own pantheistic sense of nature. Jeffers writes:

The parts change and pass, or die, people and races and rocks and stars;  
none of them seems to me important in itself, but only the whole. This  
whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in  
earnest, that I am compelled to love it, and to think of it as divine.

Jeffers is able to represent the complete relationship between humanity and nature. Tor House his Carmel home, as well as the Carmel/Big Sur seacoast itself, with its hunting hawks, possessed and spoke through him in his writing.

For Jeffers spiritual reality was incarnate in the natural world. In nature, he sensed the unity of all existence with the universe as a whole. His spiritual belief he describes this way:

I believe that the Universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, therefore parts of one organic whole. This whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in earnest, that I am compelled to love it and to think of it as divine. It seems to me that this whole alone is worthy of the deeper sort love and there is peace, freedom, I might say a kind of salvation, in turning one's affections outward toward this one God, rather than inwards on one's self, or on humanity, or on human imaginations and abstractions—the world of spirits.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the Section called "Crossings," the speaker discovers that man and nature are interchangeable and that after death there is rebirth. She finds landscapes that exist beyond the ones you can see. In the poem "The Crossing Over" the speaker floats with a fish down the river each one taking on parts of each other's physicality in an effort to survive different natural environments: "The creature lurches, and together / We float over the silted bed / the granite rocks."

In the poem "To Become Holy," "Pale flowers sprout the dead / back to life."

"The Cellar" describes the speaker climbing down into dark depths only to find "an old world on shelves."

When the speaker is surprised by gray moths that try to communicate with her, she frees them from their darkness: "I shove open the cold pane / release wings into the world."

In a number of my poems, William Wordsworth's descriptions of nature and the spiritual effects of natural scenery are clearly influential. Wordsworth describes nature as a place of refuge. In his poem, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," Wordsworth enables the reader to drift and wander like a cloud as part of nature. His vision of daffodils lessens the feelings of loneliness and is a comforting image: "And then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils."

It seems that for Wordsworth nature is comforting; nature is undying and always returns. Wordsworth's influence in my work can be seen in many of these poems, including "The Shooting of Manoel Cardoza Portuguese Immigrant May 29, 1888,"

Manoel floated  
from this life to the next,  
in the mountain stream that fed his fields.

Today the blood of the immigrant  
made of mountain mud  
soaks animal paths,  
old Indian trails.

His veins lead into thick forest.

Find him,  
  
the throb of water  
  
in McAdams creek.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the section called “Last of Her Line,” some of the speaker’s pioneer ancestors who lived in Scott valley are portrayed as people who had the endurance to fulfill their destinies. Humanity’s relationship to the land and the cycles of life and death dominate these poems. In “Last of Her Line” death and rebirth occur almost simultaneously. A pioneer woman who has outlived all her family lies down in the grass to die and hears seeds splitting:

The snake tenses its muscles  
  
as she waits for her world to begin  
  
on the other side of cold grass.  
  
She can almost hear seeds splitting  
  
in the dark loam.  
  
It’s final,  
  
It’s a beginning.

By the end of this section “The Widow Silva” is a testament to pioneer endurance when after burying her husband she shoots his old and failing horse and with daylight to spare finishes the ranch chores: “And it’s time to take corn to the hens, / turn the bull out to the cows, / check for leaning fences.”

The poetry of Chitra Divakaruni, which tells stories about Indian immigrants in America, has also had a thematic influence on my work. Her use of domestic landscapes such as a mother's kitchen, or a rural schoolroom draws her readers to the inner landscape of the South Asian woman's psyche. In her poem "Yuba City School,"

The books are full of black curves,  
dots like eggs that boil-weevil lays  
each monsoon in furniture-cracks  
in Ludhiana. Far up in front  
the teacher makes word-sounds  
Neeraj does not know. They float  
From her mouth-cave, he says,  
in discs, each a different color. <33> Black Candle

Divakaruni's bi-cultural perspective and depth of feeling make the world of the South Asian woman accessible to all who are unfamiliar with it. She is able to intertwine the sense of the immigrant woman's experience with the pains and joys of the ordinariness of women's lives, making her poetry recognizable to all readers irrespective of culture. She does this by using language which is intense, imagistic and compressed.

"Kitchen Dreams" a poem about a woman in a loveless marriage who literally lives in the domestic landscape of her own kitchen, is influenced by Divakaruni's work: "She sleeps on a cot in the kitchen. / Like a cat she watches him in the dark, / Her teakettle hissing a warning."



My poem, "Ghost of Mary Prada," a monologue spoken by an immigrant woman who comes to California as a mail order bride only to die in childbirth, also draws its narrative directness from the straight forward stories told by Divakaruni's immigrant narrators: "A priest mumbles the rosary, / my Joe looms above me, / his hands at his sides, big and useless."

\*\*\*\*\*

The section called "Saving Myself focuses on the speaker's continued search for her past and identity. In the poem "California Bride 1879," the face of the speaker's great grandmother floats in the poem's speaker's dreams:

The face of Maria Neves  
floats in my dreams.  
She was my great grandmother.  
I wear her eyes,  
speak in her voice.

In "Hiking in the Shasta-Trinity Forest" the speaker hikes an introspective divide between the summit and herself:

sunlight traces  
a path  
through pines,  
a divide  
between  
the summit and myself.

Resolution for the speaker in her search for her past and identity comes with the final poems in the collection. The poems “What matters is the morning” and “Saving Myself” affirm the speaker’s life in the present. The last poem, “Saving Myself” constitutes the speaker’s resolution of her search:

I rise from the cold, moving current,  
find shallow water,  
and sit among the stones.  
  
In a mountain pool  
where a trout darts  
  
I bless my reflection.

The speaker sits among the “stones,” (her ancestors) with the acceptance of her own life and the awareness that she is part of the earth’s process of being.

The narrative aesthetic that is evident in my collection stems the influences of Divakaruni, Jeffers, and Wordsworth. Among poems in the collection, “The Rancher’s Wife” is most clearly influenced by Divakaruni, “Silence of the Mountain” is most clearly influenced by Jeffers, and “Leaves” is most clearly influenced by Wordsworth. In poems such as these, the speaker in the poems must resurrect her pioneer ancestors from the very ground where they are buried in order to know who they were and who she is. In exploring the geography of her family history the speaker develops a personal relationship with the landscape and comes to discover that the land remembers. The home place of her ancestors embraces myth, legend, fact and folklore communicating a physical and cultural legacy. A people can return again to tell their tales.

# *Crossings*

## **Journey**

Years of lift and scrape,  
slip and crack,  
the Siskiyou mountains.  
My gold hunter ancestors  
haunt the ridge,  
darken the slope.  
See them rise,  
hear the thunder of the peaks.  
A blackbird passes above  
to where the world  
moves over the horizon,  
the upper air,  
thinness beyond breath,  
shifting bodies,  
many voices.  
With beating wings  
they slip away,  
and the sun runs cold in Scott valley  
where a frozen bird lies,  
and seeds sleep uneasily,  
unsure of their time.

## **The Immortals**

Highway 3 through Scott Valley  
birth canal for another way  
to be born.

The valley its weedy edges  
alive with snakes and bugs  
In the presence of stones  
I feel the embrace of moss  
the shape of my future in the fern's face

A deluge of light  
laps against my feet  
floods the Fort Jones cemetery  
Sunlight over corpses hollowed by decay  
bones as body of the rock, of the land

I stand somewhere between  
the seen and the unseen  
Mortal as the earth  
stranded in the present  
I hurry myself to the highway.

## Cleansing

1

Monarchs do not fly here,  
nor does the yellow mustard grow.  
No trees for birds to nest,  
only streets  
where men in long cars push  
through jammed avenues.  
Officials inspect wind  
trapped in pillars,  
examine the river  
thick with lead and sludge.

2

In my home with no ceiling  
I find lacework, the smell of mothballs  
in my hope chest.  
My grandmother weeps down  
from the sky.  
Tears flood my house,  
swim in my ribcage,  
drum on my heart.

All night  
I feel the slippery body of water.  
Seeds fall from my eyes.  
In the morning I rise  
with liquid hands.  
When I shake them out  
they turn green.  
Blackbirds perch on them.

## **The Cellar**

Past the every day  
kitchen cabinets,  
stainless steel appliances,  
a descent into darkness.  
My flashlight a yellow eye  
unable to see beyond  
a thin stream of illumination.  
Hands feel along walls  
to find the switch.  
A forty -watt bulb  
reveals an old world  
arranged on shelves.  
Amber vials, dusty canning jars,  
brim with mold.  
In the corner piecework quilts,  
graying dolls recline.  
Unfamiliar faces in old photographs,  
deeds to places that no longer exist  
in a cardboard box.  
Smudged against the dirty window  
moths the color of ash  
rise up against the ceiling,  
then back down to tag the bulb.  
To get my attention  
they circle above me  
wings clapping.  
They flutter against my chest,  
tickle my ears.  
I shove open the cold pane  
release wings into the world.

### **Summertime Passing**

The flies I killed  
with my swatter this summer  
haunt me.

Nights I can't sleep,  
I rescue moths.  
They flop around my lantern.  
Gathering them in a tablecloth,  
I watch them flutter toward the moon.  
The ones I can't save,  
litter the porch like leaves.

This morning I cross  
the Fort Jones cemetery  
leading to my family plot.  
I place poppy seeds on the stones,  
the shadow of a hawk  
rumples over the grass.

Clouds are being pulled  
apart by the wind,  
there is something about  
their torn white mouths,  
like the dead  
who will take my hands some day,  
when I will rise,  
like a wave out of the hot field.



## **The Crossing**

No one walks the cattle path now, no one but the cows.  
I follow tracks deep in the ground, sink into spring ooze  
where several layers down  
lie those who cultivated this land.  
In the soft ticking of weeds  
I hear singing,  
harmonies I do not understand.  
The wind hisses the names of the dead,  
and from a clover bed, with no wings or halos,  
they rise up to walk the pasture.

When a hawk drifts down, hooked claws extended,  
my feet crush lupines and buttercups.  
I run towards Moffett Road.  
From an oak a shadow of birds explodes,  
and the air hums with souls.  
No breath  
I reach paved road and walk towards town.  
Ranchers wave when I pass  
as though I have forgotten something,  
as though I should turn back.

### **Times of Sorrow**

and times of relief  
the heated death rooms  
of the elders'  
eternal bulk  
makes me sit  
not move  
becoming  
their monument.

Candles  
open coffin eyes  
the dead pull away  
from their bodies  
move  
between slats  
of venetian blinds

Outside the window  
a sudden tearing of wind  
as they rise up  
over the blue oak.

## Leaves

I long for those birds,  
clouds of ducks and geese  
their flight home  
myself bound to earth,  
to these mountains.

I watch leaves  
drop  
one by one,  
the distance between now  
and my future shortens.

This November, dappled  
with drizzle and dropped clouds.  
It's the leaves that fill me,  
the damp that gnaws  
the long merging shadows.

I believe what thunder says,  
see with my own eyes  
the spaces between the leaves  
fill with light.

### **Early December**

Uncertain sunlight  
the past  
a hidden place.  
This heart  
a floating eye  
drifts  
from room to room.  
In the attic  
my history.  
Night things are awake  
watching.  
I hang outside myself  
like a bat,  
under my head  
the drop.

### **Without Horizon**

Sun drops  
below the sugar pine.  
Snow falls—  
the world moves out of focus.  
Directions disappear,  
no trace of foot or paw.  
Without edges  
I am somewhere  
between the place  
I began  
and the place  
I will end.  
Out of the cottonwood  
a bitter sigh.  
The lone call  
of a late--  
migrating bird.  
The sky darkens.

In cold solitude  
I wait  
for virgin earth  
to be discovered  
again.

### **Looking for a Sign**

Frosty mornings shimmer,  
winds swirl the days shorter,  
and the cold keeps me moving  
through darkness,  
to find sun.

When the wood of my front door swells it stuck,  
I tuck myself in bed and eat canned peaches,  
Inhale the smoke of pine-scented candles,  
and wonder what it is I believe in.

The homeless and the frauds  
huddle in churches,  
and granddad sinks deeper  
into the center of the house,  
I hibernate,  
and ignore sudden storms,  
mildew in the shower.

On Solstice day I search the pale sky,  
look for a light.  
By midnight,  
Christmas neon outshines stars.  
I stoke the Franklin stove  
and strain to smell the charred sweetness  
of an afterlife.

### **Awakened by Geese**

The December sky so clear  
I can almost see through it.  
My dream last night  
of flying,  
of leaving the body's struggle.  
With a crack of gunfire  
morning opens  
to the flutter of trees,  
of feathers into air.  
The sky fills with honking birds.  
I am deaf to their fear  
as I watch them  
disappear over the edge  
where spirit loses  
touch with matter.

## **Ghosts of the Siskiyou**

Night emerges from under a hawk's wings,  
from the deep roots of the land,  
where rodents thrive close to the earth.

Darkness lurks behind the waterfall,  
and under stones gazing up at me  
with half faces.

Leaves of the California oaks  
their branches sag,  
touch the ground.

The moon walks the ridge.  
It glimmers on the hillside,  
calling the dead out of the stony soil.

In the lunar light  
I watch them rise  
slowly into the sky.

I sleepwalk among low clouds,  
sing with coyotes on a mountain trail,  
listen to my voice carry back to me.

At the top of the mountain,  
the moon gets stuck in a frozen sky-  
then the stars break out.

I sing louder, wanting my voice  
to be heard  
and not come back.



### **In the Woods at Night**

Shadows move in  
light falls to the ground.  
Colors fill up the darkness  
clots of red, spasms of purple.  
My eyesight dims.  
Deer trail sinks into canyon.

When night comes alive  
it hums, it crawls.  
I can hear the deep dead turn,  
see roots bulge up from the dirt.  
Eyes shine on me  
a wet nose touches my hand.

Unwinged, human  
I want to save myself from danger  
but with no sharp beak or claws  
I can't protect myself  
from hungry raptors  
a world that gets up on all fours.

In the open meadow  
hooves find ground.  
Over and over  
animals knock on the earth,  
leave no tracks.

I follow a thin moon  
find new life  
in the dry creek bed.  
I move slowly over a log  
my legs reborn,  
my claws deep in the wood.

## **Crossing Over**

The air thick with pine and pitch  
my reel spins, rod bends,  
line goes taut.  
A pink mouthed trout flies from the water  
and lidless eyes go to sky.

The creature lurches, and together  
we float over the silted bed,  
the granite rocks.

Then a silver blue flaps on the river bank,  
gasps land's atmosphere.  
Gills seal and appendages grow.

I swallow the wooly worm,  
and the world becomes a river in me,  
my eyes the reflection of birds flying.

From the dead, great grandfather  
calls to me,  
tells me to go home  
to my backyard animals,  
turning tame.

### **Gray Lodge in January**

White wings, black-tipped,  
shine in fog shrouded fields.  
Snow-geese, calling and stirring.  
Their need for this place,  
my need for this place.  
Feathers unfold, lift off.  
The sky turns restless  
and winged.  
Memory of being  
where distances don't exist,  
like the moment before life  
to be reborn  
or to fly.

### **I Wake Ruby Throated**

Drafts shimmer a humming  
through the broken pane.  
Wings beat against time.  
Blur of pastel  
near the window cornice.

Long beak stills,  
pressed wings come to rest,  
dead weight  
a silent sway.  
Whirr of two worlds.

# ***Last of Her Line***

### **Last of Her line**

She follows ghost ruts of extinct wagon roads,  
finds her husband, her mother, her baby.  
They make their way single file  
along the night trails of her memory.

Bent to the ground with age,  
with the death of everyone she knows,  
she walks slowly over the pasture.  
Near a stand of oaks  
through vein work of branches,  
the sky sends signals to her eyes.

In a field wrapped by barbed wire  
where death perches on fence posts  
she goes down on her knees,  
with the wild mustard and gopher holes.

The snake tenses its muscles  
as she waits,  
on the other side of cold grass.

**The Shooting of Manoel Cardoza**  
**Portuguese Immigrant May 29, 1888**

Killed for water  
standing in his own alfalfa field  
red faced with work.

The gunshot crashed down the mountain  
and up the other side,  
rattling back through the valley.

The sound and the jerk,  
shoulders collapse  
his body folds,  
then crumples.

He lay curled on the ground  
dirt pressed against his face,  
his body gored  
by tiny horns of sprouting grass.

Shot in the back by Charles Davidson,  
son of James Davidson  
first white baby born in Fort Jones  
who grew to manhood  
greedy for water rights.

Manoel floated,  
from this life to the next,  
in the mountain stream that fed his fields.

Today an immigrant's blood,  
made of mountain mud  
soaks animal paths,  
old Indian trails.  
His veins lead into thick forest.

Find him,  
the throb of water  
in McAdams creek.

### **They Meet at a Chamarrita**

The port, dark and sweet, the swirling light of dance,  
his loosened damp collar, her gray skirts, unfolding.  
Wrists and hands, the need to touch.  
The room rises and falls with their hastening breath.

Spring clutches the plum blossom,  
the girl leaves her father for the marriage bed.  
Behind pulled curtains,  
he watches her undress, her body edged in darkness.  
They breathe in the night fragrance of spruce and pine,  
wild lupine.  
Through half-shut eyes, she is calm and does not speak.

Under his hands, her heart,  
like a bird's muffled flutter.  
Skin hums, and slender thighs press closer.  
Shadows walk above their heads.  
They rustle and toss,  
till light seeps through the window.  
Still, they linger on the paling sheets,  
halfway familiar, halfway strange.



### **The Rancher's Wife**

She raises the shades to dark trees  
and glowing fields of wheat and pasture.  
She opens windows  
to the fragrance of honeysuckle,  
the sharp smell of manure.

Through the kitchen pane  
she watches as his calloused hands  
lift bales of hay into air.  
She opens the screen door,  
puts her hands in his,  
pulls him inside.

She undresses for him,  
rolls her nylons down around her ankles,  
removes heart-shaped lace and girdle,  
shows him her olive thighs.

She rubs oil in his cracked palms,  
removes splinters,  
then waits for whatever  
his hands will give her.

All night there is intimacy  
under a yellow lamp.  
At 6:00AM she's calm and slow,  
lighting the woodstove  
measuring the pour of milk,  
the breakfast, ready to serve him.

## **Ghost of Mary Prada**

1

I come from an island of stones  
to marry Joe.  
In Pico,  
stones on top of the land, underneath it  
overflowing into the ocean.  
With bare hands I claw through stones  
to find the earth.

2

At my wedding I dance the Chamarrita  
with Joe.  
A glass of red wine, then another,  
my shawl, a heap on the floor.  
We sleep good on an iron bed  
with a big mattress.

3

Here in California cherries, apricots,  
prunes are plucked loose from limbs,  
sound of fruit striking the bottoms of buckets.  
I grow vegetables;  
Beet hearts, potatoes curled like pale grubs.  
I milk cows, churn butter,  
can fruits in tin cans sealed with wax,  
make soups of kale or cabbage,  
a shriveled onion, a dried bean.  
I pound dough into loaves.  
Big with a baby,  
I sit in the evening with my crocheting,  
let the orchard come through the window.

4

When my boy breaks through me  
blue and silent,  
a stain seeps  
red and sticky on the sheets.  
The midwife bends over me,  
dips a towel into a bucket of hot water.  
Lying on my side, I can see out the window  
the apple trees stretch over the hill.  
A priest mumbles the rosary,  
my Joe looms above me,  
his hands at his sides, big and useless.

Continued with a break

**Ghost of Mary Prada (Continued)**

5

Joe can't sleep nights, the bedsprings creak,  
first one side, then the other.  
The two stones on the grassy hill,  
men in starched clothes,  
women dressed in black  
faces wet behind their veils.  
The smell of wilting roses,  
paper flowers,  
crowns and wreaths.

## **Festa do Espirito Santo**

Maria Silveira  
studies the stained glass,  
the lambs and saints.  
She kneels and bows,  
the host fusing to her tongue  
the holiness of her sex,  
a scent of blossoms.

A day to be the heroine,  
to be the Queen, St. Isabel.  
Curls wound from rags cascade her back.  
A mother-of-pearl crucifix from *avo*,  
the long gown of satin and crocheted  
lace from her mother's garment bag.  
Beneath her dress, a field of flowers.

She glides down the aisle and onto the street,  
a halo of glittering crown and velvet cape.  
Side maids and sign bearers,  
little queens wrapped in frothy lace  
with missing front teeth flank her.  
Along the boulevard they float  
like angels without bodies  
who wear white dresses.

Sweet seller ladies of the Altar Society  
offer malasadas, plump and sugared.  
Women balance baskets of sweet bread  
sway to the music of the brass band.  
Then comes the sopas,  
a feast for all, of mint flavored stew  
with meat that falls easy from the bone.

### **When Uncle Louie Dies**

Uncle Louie complains of pains,  
sharp lights that come and go.  
Greased with salve  
his chest shakes,  
and he coughs blood.

Every night he dies,  
every morning he rises.  
The sun finds its way  
inside his window  
holds him to the light,  
till his body goes mute.

His wife May  
builds him a grave,  
dreams a great mound.  
While her red hens sleep  
yolks shriek inside their shells.  
She gathers all the eggs in her arms,  
rocks them in her apron.

## **Roan**

The black mare trots out of the barn  
to pasture in the meadow near the Neves ranch.  
She searches for the stallion.  
The roan that bucked off the Neves boy.  
Flung him to the ground, then ran off to the woods.  
Her stallion, wild somewhere, and hungry.  
The mare remembers how he leaped  
for apples.  
Trembling, sweet fruit, on the bough  
so low a horse could reach them.  
The moon lifts into the cleft of the mountain,  
as the old barn door creaks in the wind  
and hawks cry overhead,  
then dive.

## **Wash Day**

Cook-starch steams on the woodstove,  
a tin bucket of well-water ready for boil.  
Crocheted lace soaks in a tub.

Face in a squint, lips a steady line,  
her wet and glistening fingers  
rub linens against washboard ribs.

See her near the corn patch,  
braided hair turning white,  
in a cotton-meal sack dress.

Clothes clapping on the line,  
pillow slips billowing around her head,  
like clouds.

### **Kitchen Dreams**

Before she lives in the kitchen,  
she sleeps with him in the bedroom.  
They make children to love,  
because they can't love each other.  
He knows nothing about women,  
and doesn't want to learn.  
She holds her yearnings inside,  
yearnings that can't feed his hunger.

She sleeps on a cot in the kitchen.  
Like a cat she watches for him in the dark,  
her teakettle hissing a warning.  
She cooks him venison stew,  
he runs his hunting knife across the oak table.  
The years get lost in a dark corner  
where silverfish live and are happy.



## **Heart Condition**

It's an old story,  
a sailor on leave.  
For a while she receives his letters.  
Years later she's still looking for her heart.  
She wants it back.  
Searches for it in old love songs.  
Hunched over in bad light  
she devours romance novels  
like sugar cookies.

She sprays the door knob with cologne,  
wears a wool nightgown trimmed in lace,  
and waits for her favorite romance hero.  
She dreams he will pull her to him,  
push his tongue deep in her mouth,  
massage her chest till it pulses.

Her hero doesn't show up,  
and the moon shines like melted ice through the window.  
Her house is heated, but doesn't get warm.  
She lies in her empty bed afraid to die loveless,  
Afraid she will turn into a pile of wool,  
be eaten by moths.

### **Aunt Lucy**

She is someone at the end  
of a raspy voice,  
a handful of tiny bones.  
I was a child  
when her husband left,  
children grew and scattered.  
I remember the angry shine  
of her kitchen floor,  
faded yellow dishes.  
I used to hide in her cellar,  
among rats and dirty jars.

The years have shaped her  
into a hunched shadow,  
covered her in dark wool.  
When she shakes your hand  
she does not let go.  
Some nights she cries for her mother,  
wants to be rocked to sleep.  
Her hens still lay eggs each day  
in old shit and straw.  
Soon she will choose the egg  
that will be her last meal,  
before she breaks open.

### **The Widow Silva**

She buried his ashes  
then planted a tree in them.  
Nights she sleeps on a cold mattress.

Today she sits on the porch  
in her new chair from Sears  
peeling apples.

Her husband's old mare  
leans against the fence  
heaves and coughs,  
nose in the dirt.

She pushes against gravity  
rises from her rocker.

Gray Sally follows her easy,  
limps out to pasture  
trails her along the cow path.

Eyes sharp and wild,  
the crack of a rifle.  
The widow leaves the mare  
where she falls.  
Leaves her for the wolves.

Back at home,  
the apples are turning brown.  
And it's time to take corn to the hens,  
turn the bull out to the cows,  
check for leaning fences.

## **Grandfather**

You go during one winter of wilderness.  
The years have flattened your grave with the earth,  
wind wiped your name from the granite stone.

You had woods and weather,  
rising bluffs and arching sky,  
mountains that lift clear to the ocean.  
The apple orchard you set on the green hill.  
Sons and daughters all born  
at your old mountain home.

You worked year after year,  
plowing back and forth with your shaggy maned horse,  
clans of birds, tribes of beasts in the forest.  
I can see you working cattle since daybreak  
then home by nightfall, supper and sleep.

No tree, or stone, or fence, the same,  
since you left.  
The brown barn leans like an animal,  
the apples are small and bitter.  
Hungry deer straggle in leaving bits of hide  
on barbed wire.

I remember your promise of a hike in the woods,  
a swim in the pond, the trout we might catch.  
In dreams, you tell me to rake the dead stalks,  
clean the earth bare again, scatter the wild grass.

## ***Saving Myself***

### **Azorean Sea Tale**

When she sees him  
on the beach near Lages,  
he looks at her,  
then toward the ocean,  
then back at her.

She leads him  
to the hidden cove  
and they swim with the dolphins.  
A fire burns through their eyes.  
They lie in the sand  
their lips wet,  
their terror  
an uncontrollable joy.

One day his boat doesn't return.  
She finds no message from him  
in the roar of the conch shell,  
braces herself  
against crashing waves.

She remembers stories  
of men in dangerous seas  
buoyed to shore by dolphins.  
When she visits the cove  
the dolphins plunge into the water  
like tear drops.

**At the Village of Santa Barbara, Island of Pico;  
Looking for My Great, Great Grandmother, Maria Francesca do Cabral**

My fingernails scrape lava stones,  
loosen dust.  
Back one hundred years and out to sea,  
drowned ones stir in their kelp beds.

Looking for the other world  
I find a fissure in the earth that leads  
to where the sea tosses its wet creatures,  
their lungs exhaling.

The ocean spreads dark and cold beneath the night,  
reaches with every wave  
for drops of light shed by the moon,  
a radiance where unfathomed fish glow.

Musty air and a ghost rattle through banana leaves  
you rise up, bones of family architecture, luminous.  
A woman without soil, you carved roots  
from stones of the island.

Into the Azorean sea you dive.  
The splash of your body, and I jump,  
scattering stars, to pull towards you.  
Where ocean and sky meet, you vanish.

Your memory, the afterlife dissolving  
all that salt  
seeping back into the sea  
an ocean mist without end.

I hold my breath, hear the heartbeat of waves,  
feel the ocean of my blood.  
My body takes pleasure in forgetting gravity,  
the need for breathing on my own.

I ask God to throw me a line.  
Floating to the shore I feel the pull of the universe  
slow everything down, to where heaven pulls the earth  
into its arms.

### **California Bride; 1879**

Bones half-grown, she rises  
from a ship's dark hold.  
Gives herself up  
to a hard-handed miner,  
and grows thin from miscarriage,  
fat from pregnancy.  
Sings songs in Portuguese  
as she hurries from cabin to sluice box  
on small calloused feet.

I remember the old woman,  
not the girl.  
A widow in black,  
with thick stockings, heavy shoes.  
Lived in the corner  
of my grandmother's kitchen  
gluing broken dishes.  
Always moving and praying.  
Boiled her own egg  
till the day she died.

The face of Maria Neves  
floats in my dreams.  
She was my great grandmother.  
I wear her eyes,  
speak in her voice.  
She is waving her hands,  
reshaping the air  
to tell me in broken English,  
that "life is no sugar."



## 50 Years Later

I am the girl who wandered away,  
grown now.  
I walk down the hill,  
the house rises to meet me.  
Fifty years ago the Neves ranch,  
barn and stock, a brood of children.  
This is where they lived.  
My great grandfather set these boundary fences,  
planted these posts.

The well is dry now,  
the creek diverted.  
I remember falling into Moffett Creek,  
the long arms that pulled me out,  
dried me off.  
Since the ranch fell vacant  
dead stalks mat the ground,  
milkweed floats from unworked fields.

The barn, with its dead wood,  
let pigeons leap through cracks,  
streaks and shadows that vanish into sky.  
Wind swings the door  
for spirits who ghost up from the field.  
I hear them low,  
generations of cattle fattened then butchered.

The old house leans toward the road.  
I wait for someone to open the door,  
show me the dust where my mother was born.  
No one at the window waves.  
A hawk lies dead on the front porch,  
a wasp nest above the door.  
Kneeling, I crack twigs and pray hard  
to remember where I came from.  
Why I came.

## 150 Years After Gold was Discovered in California

I look for my pioneer ancestor  
in the Siskiyou mountains.  
I walk where he walked,  
hope to see how he saw it.  
Find only his marker  
in the same ground,  
that was supposed to give him gold.

He turns in his grave,  
tries to tell me his story.  
He breaks through his chest,  
and stories begin to fly out of his mouth.  
I run from this hard luck ghost.  
his shadow chasing me down trail.

I leave behind deserted mine shafts,  
ground pockmarked by holes.  
I find cougar pads, cloven hooves.  
A meadow springs back underfoot,  
barely leaves my tracks.

The sun holds it all together  
and my world dissolves into another time.  
I hear miners curse sludge that clogs  
rockers and sluice boxes.  
I hear picks and shovels,  
smell kerosene and horses,  
see ghosts of men in a crouch,  
some on their knees in mud.

On the Scott River,  
someone yells "Eureka",  
and fish jump away from the water,  
rocks tremble.

## Mushroom Woods

Evergreen forests  
offer their leaves,  
and below the surface of this world  
mushrooms hide,  
wait for the right moment.  
A cold dry season  
then warm winds, rains  
bring forth mycelium masses  
that rise up to claim the forest floor.  
In darkened thickets  
where leaf mat covers ground  
they thrust upward,  
push through leaves and soil,  
explode into moist clumps  
to spread spores, seed-like hopes  
of future species—  
*Red Russulas* with chalk-white stripes  
and spongy brown *Boletus*.  
Yellow globe of *Witch's Butter*,  
the faint lavender of *Blewitts*.  
Slice a red-pored *Bolete*  
and its flesh turns blue.  
There is risk in naming,  
danger in misnaming,  
and a short time  
to hunt them  
before the first frost.

### **To the Mountain**

He puts on his boots and starts walking  
into dark thickets with his guns and gear.  
He wades in cold waters.  
Ferns blaze up along the banks,  
trout glint in the shallows of the Sacramento.

The wood springs wild against his world,  
stags rut in the meadow  
and a great white owl  
rises silent, satiated  
the forest path still warm.

Wolves wait in granite caves  
sniffing the pale winds.  
He climbs  
feeling the earth shudder,  
the deep down ache.

His body rises up the mountain  
where he sees obsidian faces,  
hears the slow grind of bedrock  
and cross-sections of himself fall away,  
like chunks of glacier crashing into Shasta Lake.

### **After the Storm**

The Scott River,  
its waters course by in flood  
dragging trunk and limbs.  
Tree roots hold on to memory,  
the cold hand of a pioneer woman.  
She drowned herself  
choosing water and eternity.  
Underneath, a shape swims  
pale, amorphous,  
then sinks  
into the dark bed.  
I look deep,  
focus changes to sky  
and I shiver  
to see my face  
among the moss,  
awake with its own light.

## **Haunting**

Three generations,  
their fados cry out to me  
as I sleep.

At the Fort Jones cemetery  
bodies turned to old bones,  
want to rise into air.

I pull them from the soil,  
bloodlines lost,  
found.

They lift again into life  
gold hunters, sun burnt women,  
babies not yet weaned.

In dark waters of the Scott River  
fish silver up  
through shafts of light.

### **In the Shasta Trinity Forest**

Backpack  
presses to shoulders,  
trail bends  
then rises.  
Sunlight traces  
my path  
through pines,  
a divide  
between  
the summit  
and myself.  
From a jagged body  
of basalt  
the remembered hiss  
of ash.  
Upper snow,  
the mountain  
ground shifts  
beneath me.  
I pull myself up by vine,  
by trunk.  
Roots tear loose,  
give way.  
A stream of rocks  
plunges downward.  
My pulse races.  
A woodpecker  
drills into pine.

### **Silence of the Mountain**

At the edge  
of the canyon  
level with the sky  
and a wide-seeing hawk,  
I watch butterflies  
catch an updraft,  
listen  
for the grind,  
the shift  
of tectonic plates.  
Beneath my feet  
entombed  
ancient seashells,  
perfect eggs,  
animals, extinct.  
In my hand  
a chunk of magma,  
I seek to carve  
my life from  
this huge expanse,  
hear again  
the old voice  
from the mute summit,  
outrun  
the boiling mudslide.



### **A Small Destiny**

Sky ragged with shadow.  
Every leaf on the oak  
an apparition.  
Bare twigs point  
toward the earth  
in warning.

Red-tail circles the yard,  
hovers on air and light,  
pitched cry of hunger,  
the dive for sweet flesh,  
talons into soft tissue.

The feral kitten  
motionless under the heart  
of the hawk's body.

The sudden tearing of wind,  
branches wave,  
light bends.  
The kitten lifted  
out of its life.  
The earth growing smaller,  
more distant.

### **Finding the Sacred**

Born with question marks  
about my past,  
my people,  
I step inside myself  
and find running water,  
stones too heavy to bring up.  
These waters fill the banks  
with gold dust and granite,  
shining mica and quartz.  
No heaven here, but root,  
alluvial and veined.  
Still I hear voices,  
see ghosts drift in and out,  
the drone of the river.

In the old growth forest  
I listen for footsteps,  
and hear birdsong.  
In this place of rest,  
this ancestral path of migration,  
the air pulses angelic  
from the throat of a sparrow.  
In my hands, the smell of prayer  
gathered in a bouquet of lavender.  
Madrone bark,  
red and gold,  
flame like candles.  
Crows on the church roof  
a ring of ancestors chanting.

### **What Matters in the Morning**

when light fills my window,  
an overflow of sun across my bed.  
I watch the mountains move closer,  
coming home with the daylight.  
A monarch flutters into the garden,  
rests on a hollyhock,  
peacefully opens its wings.  
I think I see something shimmer  
between the corn rows.  
It's my father in old shoes and coveralls  
hoeing, tracking weeds along snail roads,  
standing up straight, head bent and focused  
on the endless furrows of his eighty six years.  
The sun shines greenly on his hands  
as he listens to roots inch deeper into earth,  
watches baby spiders hatch, flex their legs.  
When he sees me at the window  
I hold my hand up to wave,  
he holds his,  
we are palm to palm.

## **Saving Myself**

My ancestors are stones of the river.  
They sparkle,  
their quartz veins  
glisten in granite.  
I wade carefully,  
feeling with bare feet  
smooth skinned stones.  
A muskrat swims by me  
slick-backed, fur shining.

Braced against current  
and slippery bank  
I lose my step,  
fall into the cold stream.  
A water sprite travels  
through 100 years  
to swim through my bones.  
Minnows scatter;  
I drink the river.

Deer breathe hard in the shadows.  
Spirits in the pines  
chant in the wind  
and a old, scaly fish  
beats up from the bottom,  
then sinks back down again.

I rise from the current,  
find shallow water,  
and sit among the stones.  
In a mountain pool  
where a trout darts,  
I bless my reflection.

### **Living Above Paradise**

I have come to live here,  
neighbor with skunk and bear,  
mountains with discerning faces.  
I walk an old deer trail  
go inward-  
deeper  
among the trees,  
where sunlight eavesdrops  
in streams of light  
and pine needles harbor  
dark knowledge.  
Long live these weeds,  
the thorn and the burr,  
these mountain strawberries.  
There is something good  
about this clear, sharp air,  
the glitter of basalt and mica,  
the sheen of crows.  
I hold myself steady in the wind  
wonder where to go from here,  
listen for the quiet  
under leaves.